

The Telephone

by John Murray



Connect to Your Life

Have you ever waited for a phone call that just wouldn't come? How did the waiting make you feel?

Key to the Drama

Dramas usually have these special parts:

- **cast of characters:** a list of the characters in the play
- **dialogue:** the words that characters say to each other
- **stage directions:** instructions (*in italics*) for the actors. They describe the setting and tell how the actors should act. They also tell much of the story.
- **scenes:** sections of the play that each happen in one time and place

Vocabulary Preview

Words to Know

reassuringly	novice
stipulated	menacingly
inherit	



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection

FOCUS

Read the cast of characters, the narrator's words, and all the stage directions. Find out what you need to know in order to understand this play.

Cast of Characters

Narrator

Mildred Hathaway, a young woman

Aunt Elizabeth, an elderly woman

Victor Hathaway, Mildred's husband

Before Curtain Rise: *Area before curtain is dimly lighted. If possible, colored spotlights move across curtain to create eerie effect. Narrator enters right and addresses audience.*

Narrator (*mysteriously*). Good evening. We are about to visit a haunted house. . . . But we will not see ghosts or **specters** from another world, for the haunting of Hathaway House is quite a different matter. (*Ring of telephone is heard from behind curtain.*) How often have you heard a telephone ring? (*Telephone rings again.*) Can anyone ever know who—or what—is waiting at the other end of the line? (*Telephone rings again.*) That telephone call might be (*pointing into audience*)—for you! (Narrator **exits**. *Curtains open.*)

specters
(spěk' tēz)
shadowy forms
that are not real

exits
(ěg' zīts)
leaves the stage

Time: *Late evening.*

Setting: *Drawing room of Hathaway House. Through French window, upstage,*
20 *we see occasional flashes of lightning. Sounds of thunder are heard from offstage. There is a sofa down left, and a telephone on a table beside it.*

drawing room
room used for
guests

**French
window**
window that goes
all the way to the
floor

At Curtain Rise: *Mildred Hathaway stands near French window, pulling back drapes and staring out at storm. Aunt Elizabeth, wearing black shawl, sits on sofa. She touches telephone, then nods to herself. There is a flash of lightning. Mildred jumps, then crosses hurriedly to sit beside Elizabeth.*

THINK IT THROUGH

Where does this play take place? Who are the characters?

FOCUS

Read to find out who Jonathan is and why he is not on the list of characters.

30 **Elizabeth.** Were you frightened by the lightning,
Mildred, my dear? A storm can be frightening.

Mildred (*nervously*). No, no, I'm not afraid. Aunt
Elizabeth, won't you let me help you to your room?

Elizabeth. No, Mildred, I must wait a little longer.
(*points to telephone*) I must be awake, in case
Jonathan calls tonight. (*Crash of thunder is heard.*
Mildred jumps nervously.) You're very nervous, my
child. Really, you shouldn't be afraid of Hathaway
House. It was once a happy place, but now there are

40 only memories. (*suddenly*) I must light
the fire in Jonathan's room. (*She stands.*)
He always loved to sit and watch the
fire. (*She pats Mildred's hand*

reassuringly.) We'll have a cup of tea as
soon as I get back. (*She exits, smiling to*

herself. *Restlessly, Mildred crosses to French window,*
pulls back drapes. Sudden flash of
lightning reveals a man standing outside.

50 *Mildred screams in terror, backs away.*
The man, Victor Hathaway, opens
window, steps into room.)

reassuringly

(rē' ə shōōr' ŭng lē)
adv. in a way that
makes one trust

REREAD

What do this and
earlier stage
directions tell you
about Mildred's
state of mind?

Mildred (*in relief, nearly hysterical*). Oh, Victor, it's
you! How you frightened me!

Victor (*roughly*). What's the matter with you,
Mildred? You can't go to pieces now!

Mildred (*frantically*). Oh, Victor, take me away from
this house! I can't stay here another night!

Victor (*sarcastically*). Why? Are you afraid of
my Uncle Jonathan?

60 **Mildred.** Yes, I am! This house belongs to
your Aunt Elizabeth, not to us. Why did
you ever bring me here?

Victor (*laughing bitterly*). You're a silly fool!

Mildred (*hysterically*). But, you don't understand!
Elizabeth still waits every day for Jonathan to
telephone her—and he's been dead for six weeks!
(*Sudden crash of thunder is heard. She points to
French window. She continues in frenzied tones.*)

We all know he's out there in the family
70 vault. We went to the funeral and saw
them seal the door of his tomb!

vault
(vôlt)
place for burials

THINK IT THROUGH

Who is Jonathan and where is he?

FOCUS

Read on to discover why Victor is so bitter.

Victor. My dear wife, *we* know that Uncle Jonathan is
dead, but Aunt Elizabeth can't seem to accept it.

You know Uncle Jonathan was always
afraid of being buried alive. He
stipulated in his will that a telephone
should be installed in the vault. So here

REREAD
Why did
Jonathan want a
telephone in the
vault?

we have it—a direct line to Jonathan
Hathaway's vault. (*points to telephone*)

stipulated
(stîp' yə lā' tîd)
v. ordered; past
tense of *stipulate*

80 **Mildred** (*wringing her hands*). I know all
that, but—

Victor (*interrupting*). Jonathan was a wealthy man.
When Aunt Elizabeth is gone, my brother Spencer

and I will **inherit** the millions of dollars he left to her. Think of it, Mildred—millions of dollars!

inherit
(ĩn hě'r' ĩt)
v. receive from one who has died

Mildred (*drawing away, frightened*). I don't want the money, Victor. Please take me away from here!

90 **Victor** (*soothingly*). All in good time, my dear. When Aunt Elizabeth is no longer with us.

Mildred. Don't say such things!

Victor (*abruptly*). Where is Aunt Elizabeth?

Mildred (*pointing to door*). Upstairs—preparing Jonathan's room.

Victor. Good. Nothing must happen to Aunt Elizabeth—not yet. I have other plans for her! I'm going upstairs for a moment myself. (*He exits. From*

REREAD
What do you think Victor's "plans" are?

100 *offstage, clock is heard chiming eleven times. As it chimes, Mildred paces floor.*)

THINK IT THROUGH

What is keeping Victor from getting his uncle's money?

FOCUS

Read on to find out *exactly* what Victor plans to do to Aunt Elizabeth.

Mildred. Eleven o'clock.

Uncle Jonathan died at eleven o'clock. (*She sits on sofa, stares at phone. Suddenly phone rings. Mildred screams, jumps to her feet. Phone rings*

again. Slowly, her hand trembling, she
 110 picks up receiver, speaks into phone.) Yes?
 Yes? . . . who's there? (*shrilly*) Why don't you
 answer? Please, answer me! (*Slowly*
 she hangs up receiver.) There was no
 one on the line! (*Behind her, drapes at*
French window move. She turns and begins to walk
toward window as if sleepwalking, her hand
outstretched, trembling. Suddenly drape is thrown
aside and Victor strides into room. Mildred gasps
and collapses onto sofa.) Victor, what were you
 120 doing out there?

REREAD

Who do you
think called?

Victor. Just conducting a little experiment.

Mildred (*suddenly remembering*). The telephone! The
 telephone rang from Jonathan's vault!

Victor. Relax, my dear. Have you forgotten
 that I'm not a novice at working with
 telephones? After all, I am an electrical
 engineer.

novice

(nŏv' ĭs)
n. beginner

Mildred (*horrified*). Did you make that phone ring,
 Victor?

130 **Victor** (*nodding*). Yes. I spliced the wire and
 connected it to a buzzer outside.

(*menacingly*) I don't intend to wait any
 longer to inherit the Hathaway fortune.

menacingly

(mĕn' ĭ sĭng lĕ)
adv. in a
 threatening way

Mildred. Don't talk like that, Victor!

Victor. Quiet! When Aunt Elizabeth returns, I'll make
 some excuse to leave the room. Then the telephone
 will ring again. . . . Perhaps the shock will be too
 much for Aunt Elizabeth's heart.

140 **Mildred.** I won't let you do this! I'm going to tell her
 what you're planning!

Victor (*menacingly*). No, I don't think you'll do that. (*She backs away from him, frightened.*) Cooperate with me, Mildred, and in a little while you'll have the luxuries you've always wanted. (*Aunt Elizabeth enters.*)

THINK IT THROUGH

What is Victor planning to do?

FOCUS

Read on to find out if Mildred goes along with Victor's plan.

Elizabeth. It's so nice and warm in Jonathan's room. Such a bright fire! I know he'll be delighted.

Victor. How about a cup of tea, Aunt Elizabeth?

Mildred (*quickly*). I'll fix it.

150 **Victor.** No, Mildred. (*smiles*) I'll attend to the tea. I'll attend to everything. (*He exits right.*)

Mildred (*desperately*). Wouldn't you like to lie down, Auntie? I'll bring the tea to your room.

Elizabeth (*sadly*). No, I'll wait here a little while longer. The telephone call, you know. (*She sits on sofa.*)

Mildred. But it's so cold in here.

Elizabeth. I don't mind the cold, my dear. You know, I feel so close to Jonathan tonight. Oh, how he loved to sit in this room with me! He never liked being alone. (*gestures to phone*) That's why he wanted the telephone. He was afraid of being left there—alone—in the dark.

gestures
(jës' cherz)
points with a
hand

160 **Mildred** (*nervously*). Please don't talk like that, Aunt Elizabeth.

Elizabeth (*taking her hand*). Don't worry, dear. Someday Jonathan will come back, and I'll never be alone again.

REREAD

What does this tell you about Elizabeth?

170 (*Telephone rings. Mildred jumps and stares at Aunt Elizabeth in terror. Aunt Elizabeth smiles happily.*) It's Jonathan! I knew he'd call. (*She reaches for telephone. Mildred grabs her hand.*)

Mildred (*desperately*). Don't answer that phone! Don't you understand? Jonathan is dead! (*Phone rings again.*)

Elizabeth (*with quiet dignity*). Please, Mildred, I must answer. (*Mildred releases her hand, and Elizabeth picks up receiver and speaks into it.*) Hello? Hello? Is that you, Jonathan? . . . I can't
180 hear anything. . . . Jonathan? (*Slowly she replaces receiver; to Mildred*) There was no one on the line. Jonathan needed me, and you kept me away from the telephone. (*Victor enters, carrying tray with teapot and cups. He puts tray on coffee table.*)

THINK IT THROUGH

How does Mildred try to protect Aunt Elizabeth from Victor?

FOCUS

Read to the end to find out if Victor's plan succeeds.

Victor. What happened?

Elizabeth (*dejectedly*). Jonathan tried to call me, but Mildred wouldn't let me answer the phone until it was too late.

dejectedly
(dĭ jĕk' tĭd lē)
sadly

Too late! (*She stares off into space, as if in a trance. Victor turns angrily on Mildred.*)

190

Victor. I warned you not to interfere!

Mildred (*agitated*). I don't care what happens to me—I can't let you harm Aunt Elizabeth! (*to Aunt Elizabeth*) Aunt Elizabeth, you must realize that Jonathan is dead. The phone call wasn't from him—Victor did something to the phone. I'll—I'll prove it to you. I'll go out to the vault. I'll prove that Jonathan Hathaway is dead!

REREAD

Where is Mildred going? Why?

200 **Elizabeth** (*brightening*). You'll go to the vault? Oh, Mildred, you are so kind! I'll get your coat. (*She exits.*)

Mildred (*calmly*). I know what you're thinking, Victor, but I don't care. I was a fool to listen to you. First thing tomorrow I'm going to call Aunt Elizabeth's lawyer, and tell him everything. (*Victor raises his hand as if to strike her, just as Aunt Elizabeth re-enters with raincoat. Quickly Victor drops his hand.*)

210 **Elizabeth** (*handing raincoat to Mildred*). Go quickly! Jonathan is waiting for you! (*Mildred puts on coat, walks toward French window.*)

Victor (*starting after her*). I'm coming, too, Mildred.

REREAD

Why do you think Victor is going with Mildred?

(They exit. Elizabeth stands looking after them, then walks downstage, stands near telephone. Suddenly telephone rings. She picks up receiver.)

- Elizabeth** *(into phone)*. Yes? Yes? . . . Oh, Jonathan, I can hear you perfectly! . . . How long I've waited! . . . Yes, Victor and Mildred will be there in a minute. . . .
- 220 You'll meet them at the door of the vault? . . . Oh, yes, they'll be very much surprised! . . . Yes, Jonathan, I'll be waiting for you. I'll be waiting. *(Hangs up phone and walks to French window, parts drapes and looks out. Suddenly sound of*
- | | |
|---|---|
| <i>Victor screaming in strangled voice is heard from offstage, followed by sound of Mildred's shrill scream. Sound of a squeaking door followed by heavy thud is heard.</i> | REREAD
What is the meaning of Victor's "strangled" voice? the heavy thud? |
|---|---|
- 230 Aunt Elizabeth *drops drape, returns to center stage; thoughtfully*) Sounds as if Jonathan was there to meet them, all right! *(laughs in satisfied way as curtain closes)*

THINK IT THROUGH

1. What do you think happens to Victor at the end? What about Mildred?
2. Is Jonathan dead or alive at the end? Use evidence from the play to explain your opinion.
3. Why does Elizabeth laugh at the end?